

***Year of Wonders:* a novel of the Plague** By Geraldine Brooks

New York : Viking, 2001.

Pages: 308 p. plus maps

ISBN: 067091021X

Summary

Geraldine Brooks's *Year of Wonders* describes the 17th-century plague that is carried from London to a small Derbyshire village by an itinerant tailor. As villagers begin, one by one, to die, the rest face a choice: do they flee their village in hope of outrunning the plague or do they stay? The lord of the manor and his family pack up and leave. The rector, Michael Mompellion, argues forcefully that the villagers should stay put, isolate themselves from neighboring towns and villages, and prevent the contagion from spreading

From the book jacket

When an infected bolt of cloth carries plague from London to an isolated mountain village, a housemaid named Anna Frith emerges as an unlikely heroine and healer. Through Anna's eyes we follow the story of the plague year, 1666, as her fellow villagers make an extraordinary choice.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly Review

Discriminating readers who view the term historical novel with disdain will find that this debut by praised journalist Brooks (Foreign Correspondence) is to conventional work in the genre as a diamond is to a rhinestone. With an intensely observant eye, a rigorous regard for period detail, and assured, elegant prose, Brooks re-creates a year in the life of a remote British village decimated by the bubonic plague. Inspired by the actual town commemorated as Plague Village because of the events that transpired there in 1665-1666, Brooks tells her harrowing story from the perspective of 18-year-old Anna Frith, a widow with two young sons. Anna works as a maid for vicar Michael Mompellion and his gentle, selfless wife, Elinor, who has taught her to read. When bubonic plague arrives in the community, the vicar announces it as a scourge sent by God; obeying his command, the villagers voluntarily seal themselves off from the rest of the world. The vicar behaves nobly as he succors his dwindling flock, and his wife, aided by Anna, uses herbs to alleviate their pain. As deaths mount, however, grief and superstition evoke mob violence against "witches," and cults of self-flagellation and devil worship. With the facility of a prose artist, Brooks unflinchingly describes barbaric 17th-century customs and depicts the fabric of life in a poor rural area. If Anna's existential questions about the role of religion and ethical behavior in a world governed by nature seem a bit too sophisticated for her time, Brooks keeps readers glued through starkly dramatic episodes and a haunting story of flawed, despairing human beings. This poignant and powerful account carries the pulsing beat of a sensitive imagination and the challenge of moral complexity. (Aug. 6) Forecast: Brooks should be a natural on talk shows as she tells of discovering the town of Eyam, in Derbyshire, in 1990, and her research to unearth its remarkable history.

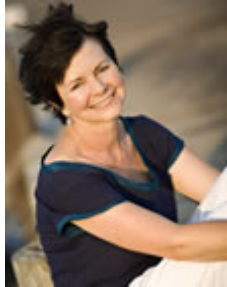
Library Journal Review

In 1666 the bubonic plague appeared in a small mountain village in England, where it took hold and spread. In a novel and courageous effort to keep the disease from extending beyond the village, the local minister and his congregation took a sacred oath to quarantine themselves until the illness was spent. Brooks has used this piece of history as a framework for her fictional account of what it might have been like to live through the event. Told by Anna Frith, the housemaid for the minister and his wife, this is a tale of devastation, grief, and madness as well as the attempts, both medicinal and spiritual, by the townspeople to combat the disease. The author has captured the various human responses to grief, fear, hopelessness, and exhaustion. Characters are well drawn, showing both the good and evil sides of human nature.

School Library Journal Review

Adult/High School-Brooks's title is based on the actual lead-mining village of Eyam, Derbyshire, whose inhabitants voluntarily quarantined themselves for a year when stricken with Bubonic Plague in 1665-1666. Anna Frith is widowed at 18 by a mining accident and is the mother of two young boys. Through her recollections, readers live through the year as her endurance and abilities are sorely tested. Anna works for the new young minister's wife, who teaches her to read and becomes more of a companion than a mistress. At her employers' suggestion, Anna takes in a boarder to help meet expenses. The man is a tailor and when a shipment of fabrics, apparently flea infested, is delivered from London-the plague is suddenly upon them. The minister convinces his flock to make the supreme sacrifice and arranges for food and supplies to be delivered to the outskirts of the hamlet. The story is a portrait of the best and worst in people faced with sorrow, terror, and death. Some succumb to madness, others display cowardice and hysteria, and a few look for solutions in murder or self-mutilation. Through it all, however, Anna grows in strength, abilities, and understanding as she faces the loss of her children, her friends, and her innocence, and takes on the tasks of an ever-dwindling populace. This is an excellently portrayed study of the wonder of human courage

Author Biography



<http://www.geraldinebrooks.com/>

About the Author

Birth—1955 outside Sydney, Australia

Education—B.A., Sydney University; M.A. Columbia University (USA)

Awards—Hal Boyle Award, Overseas Press Club, 1990; Nita

B. Kibble Award, 1997; Pulitzer Prize, 2006 (for *March*).

Currently lives in Virginia, USA

Geraldine Brooks is also the author of *March* (2005) and the nonfiction works *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Foreign Correspondence*. A former correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, Brooks lives in rural Virginia with her husband, author Tony Horwitz, and their son. Brooks was born in 1955 and grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney, Australia. She attended Sydney University and worked as a reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. As the Greg Shackleton Memorial Scholar she completed a Master's Degree in journalism at Columbia University in New York City in 1983. Subsequently Brooks worked for *The Wall Street Journal*, where she covered crises in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans — in 1990, for coverage of the Persian Gulf, Brooks (with Tony Horwitz) received the Overseas Press Club's Hal Boyle Award for "Best newspaper or wire service reporting from abroad". Brooks was awarded a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University for 2006.

Brooks married fellow Pulitzer recipient, Tony Horwitz, in Tourette-sur-loup, France, in 1984. They have a son, Nathaniel, and divide their time between homes in Virginia, United States and Sydney, Australia.

Her first book, *Nine Parts of Desire* (1994), based on her experiences among the Muslim women of the Middle East, was an international bestseller, translated into 17 languages. *Foreign Correspondence* (1997), which won the Nita B. Kibble Award for women's writing, was a memoir and travel adventure about a childhood enriched by penpals from around the world, and her adult quest to find them. Her first novel, *Year of Wonders*, published in 2001, is an international bestseller. Set in 1666, *Year Of Wonders* follows a young woman's battle to save her fellow villagers and her soul when the plague suddenly strikes the small Derbyshire village of Eyam.

Bibliography

Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women. 1994.

Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under to All Over. 1997.

Year of Wonders. 2001.

March. 2005.

People of the Book. 2008.

Awards and nominations

2006: Pulitzer Prize for *March*

2008: Australian Pub. Association's Literary Fiction Book of the Year for *People of the Book*

2009: Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award

Geraldine Brooks talks about *Year of Wonders*
(from www.geraldinebrooks.com)

In your afterword, you describe chancing upon Eyam and its terrible history while living in England in 1990. Can you tell us a bit about your research—for instance, what you uncovered about the townspeople and perhaps didn't include in the novel for whatever reason? What about the difficulties of writing a story that blends fiction with historical fact, especially given your journalistic, just-the-facts background?

The written record of what happened in Eyam during the plague year is scant. Apart from three letters by the rector, no narrative account from the year itself actually exists. The “histories” that purport to record the facts were actually written many years later, and historians have found inconsistencies that cast doubt on their accuracy. Therefore, there was no way to write a satisfying nonfiction narrative. And, since the story had taken root in my imagination, the only way to indulge my impulse to tell it was to take the leap into fiction. The factual basis of the story was actually very helpful to me: it was like having the framing of the house already erected—I could see the shape from the beginning. The things I decided not to use from the anecdotal accounts passed down over time were those things that would have seemed most like implausible inventions. For example, a young couple is said to have lived in the church around the plague time, seeking sanctuary from the law. The couple had been married by accident, having drunkenly taken part in a mock wedding at a tavern that was later deemed to have the force of law and sacrament. Unfortunately, the groom was already engaged to another woman. She, enraged, sought his arrest for breach of promise. The couple apparently lived a reasonable life in the church, assisted by sympathetic villagers. This story, although reasonably well substantiated, just seemed too odd to weave into my novel.

You describe the man on whom Michael Mompellion was based, William Mompesson, as “heroic and saintly” and yet you also believe that Mompesson and his wife sent their two children away before quarantining the town. How do you justify your description of the real man? And do you think this knowledge influenced your depiction of the “darker side” of the Mompellion character?

One of the fictional liberties I took with the story was a certain compression of timeframe. The plague was actually in the village for many weeks before the quarantine was agreed upon. Some people decided to send their children away into the care of relatives: there was nothing unethical in the Mompessons also choosing to do so. It was only as the epidemic really took hold that Mompesson saw the fearful virulence of the disease and became concerned about the consequences of its spread. There is nothing in the factual record to suggest that he behaved other than honorably throughout the village's terrible ordeal. However, in trying to imagine him—a young man, not long out of school, not long in a village where most of the Puritan-leaning population did not share his religious views, yet still persuasive enough to bring people to such a momentous choice—I envisioned a man of powerful conviction and charisma. Such personalities are sometimes governed by unwholesome motivations, such as the belief that they are God's infallible instruments. They can be dangerous, even deadly.

Do you believe Anna is an unlikely heroine, given the rigid class structures of her time and her sex? Why did you choose to tell this story from Anna's point of view? Did your nonfiction and in

*particular your book *Nine Parts of Desire*, which deals with the lives of Muslim women influence your decision?*

I wanted a narrator who was part of the ordinary life of the village, but also had access to the gentry, the decision-makers. Since I knew that the real rector had a maid who survived the plague, she seemed the obvious choice. Anna's character and the changes it undergoes were suggested to me by the lives of women I had met during my years as a reporter in the Middle East and Africa—women who had lived lives that were highly circumscribed and restricted, until thrown into sudden turmoil by a crisis such as war or famine. These women would suddenly find themselves having to step out of their old roles and assume vastly challenging responsibilities. I saw women who had traveled enormous personal distances—traditional village women in Eritrea who became platoon leaders in the country's independence war; Kurdish women who led their families to safety over mined mountain passes after the failure of their uprising against Saddam Hussein. If those women could change and grow so remarkably, I reasoned that Anna could, too. And remember that the Restoration was a very fluid time. All the ancient certainties—the monarchy, the Church—had been challenged within these people's lifetime. They had lived through regicide, revolution, civil war. Change was their norm. In the 1660s, women were appearing on the stage for the first time, were assuming influential roles in the Restoration court. Also, life in the villages was much less rigid and restrictive than we often imagine. I read a lot of sermons while researching the novel, and it struck me that the amount of hectoring from the pulpit on the proper behavior of women probably reflected a widely held view that a lot of "improper" behavior was going on.

In light of your research, can you put into perspective just how extraordinary the villagers' decision to quarantine themselves was? What was happening in London, for example, at the same time?

The unique thing about Eyam's quarantine was that it was voluntary. I was able to find no other examples of such communal self-sacrifice. In London, Samuel Pepys writes in his journal of the terrible treatment meted out to plague victims: "We are become as cruel as dogs one to another." There, the houses of plague victims were sealed and guarded, locking in the well with the ill, with no one to bring food, water, or comfort of any kind. Pepys writes that you could hear the cries of the afflicted coming from the houses, which were marked with large red crosses and the words "God Have Mercy."

*In a piece published in *The Washington Post* after the September 11, 2001, attacks, you wrote: "Whether we also shall one day look back upon this year of flames, germs and war as a 'year of wonders' will depend, perhaps, on how many are able—like the passengers on United Flight 93 or the firefighters of New York City—to match the courageous self-sacrifice of the people of Eyam." Will you discuss the parallels you have drawn here?*

Eyam is a story of ordinary people willing to make an extraordinary sacrifice on behalf of others. September 11, 2001, revealed heroism in ordinary people who might have gone through their lives never called upon to demonstrate the extent of their courage. Sadly, it also revealed a blind thirst for revenge that led to the murders of a Muslim, a Sikh, and an Egyptian Copt. I have imagined this same instinct to turn on and blame "the other" in the lynching of the Gowdies. Love, hate, fear. The desire to live and to see your children live. Are these things different on a beautiful autumn morning in a twenty-first-century city than they were in an isolated seventeenth-century village? I don't think so. One thing I believe completely is that the human heart remains the human heart, no matter how our material circumstances change

Background Info

The London Plague of 1665

The Black Death. In the year 1665 death came calling on the city of London. Death in the form of plague. People called it the Black Death, black for the colour of the tell-tale lumps that foretold its presence in a victim's body, and death for the inevitable result. The plague germs were carried by fleas which lived as parasites on rats. Although it had first appeared in Britain in 1348, the islands were never totally free of plague, but it was like an unpleasant possibility that people just learned to live with while they got on with their business. This time it was different.

In 1663 plague ravaged Holland. Charles II forbade any trade with the Dutch, partly out of wise concern, and partly because his realm was engaged in a fierce trade war with Holland which eventually erupted into armed conflict. Despite the precautions, the early spring of 1665 brought a sudden rise in the death rate in the poorer sections of London. The authorities ignored it. As spring turned into one of the hottest summers in memory, the number of deaths escalated and panic set in.

The rich flee. The nobility left the city for their estates in the country. They were followed by the merchants, and the lawyers. The Inns of Court were deserted. Most of the clergy suddenly decided they could best minister to their flocks from far, far away. The College of Surgeons fled to the country, which did not stop several of its members from writing learned papers about the disease they had been at such pains to avoid. The court moved to Hampton Court Palace.

The gates are closed. By June the roads were clogged with people desperate to escape London. The Lord Mayor responded by closing the gates to anyone who did not have a certificate of health. These certificates became a currency more valuable than gold, and a thriving market in forged certificates grew up.

Desperate Measures. By mid July over 1,000 deaths per week were reported in the city. It was rumored that dogs and cats spread the disease, so the Lord Mayor ordered all the dogs and cats destroyed. Author Daniel Defoe in his *Journal of the Plague Years* estimated that 40,000 dogs and 200,000 cats were killed. The real effect of this was that there were fewer natural enemies of the rats who carried the plague fleas, so the germs spread more rapidly.

Anyone in constant contact with plague victims, such as doctors, nurses, inspectors, were compelled to carry coloured staffs outdoors so that they could be easily seen and avoided. When one person in a house caught the plague the house was sealed until 40 days after the

victim either recovered or died (usually the latter). Guards were posted at the door to see that no one got out. The guard had to be bribed to allow any food to be passed to the inmates. It was not unknown for families to break through the walls of the house to escape, and in several cases they carefully lowered a noose over the guard's head from an attic window and hung him so they could get away.

Lethal letters? Londoners were shunned when they managed to escape the city. Even letters from the capital were treated as if they were poisonous. Letters were variously scraped, heated, soaked, aired, and pressed flat to eliminate "pestilential matter".

The Plague peaks. Throughout the summer the death rate escalated, reaching a high of over 6,000 per week in August. From there the disease slowly, oh so painfully slowly, receded until winter, though it was not until February of 1666 that King Charles thought it safe to return to the city. How many died? It is hard to say, for the official records of that time were patchy at best. The best guess is that over 100,000 people perished in and around London, though the figure may have been much higher.

Heroism in the midst of horror. One footnote to this tale of horror. The plague broke out in the village of Eyam in Derbyshire, brought on a shipment of old clothes sent from London. The villagers, led by their courageous clergyman, realized that the only way to stop the spread of the plague to surrounding villages was to voluntarily quarantine the village, refusing to leave until the plague had run its course. This they did, though the cost was 259 dead out of a total of 292 inhabitants. Each year this heroic event is commemorated by the [Plague Sunday Service](#) in Eyam.

Visiting Eyam, England: 'The Plague Town'

PLAGUE COMMEMORATION SERVICE LAST SUNDAY IN AUGUST EYAM DERBYSHIRE ENGLAND

EYAM, England -- As I stood by a charming, attached stone cottage in this peaceful village, the heart of the Peak District, watching a homeowner sweep her walkway, I was stunned to read the plaque in front. Once -- nearly 350 years ago -- the happy Siddall Family had lived here. And, one by one, they had been struck down by the plague.

First there was Richard, age 11, who died on Sept. 11, 1665. He was followed, within weeks, by his sister Sarah, age 13, then his father and three more sisters. Another sister died in April and, by Oct. 17, 1666, when his mother died, the family was gone. Except for young Joseph, age 3, who survived.

Few of us can imagine the horror of an illness wiping out not only most of one's family, but neighbors, friends, nearly an entire town. Of the 350 villagers in Eyam (said to be pronounced "Eeem" although some say "Ee-am"), 259 died this horrible death, including 58 children.

The plague, caused by a bacterium, hits its victims with fever, chills, vomiting, headache, diarrhea and delirium. Symptoms include a rosy, red rash and black boils -- from dried blood under the skin, caused by internal bleeding -- appear in the armpits, neck and groin. The "Black Death," as it is known, can be excruciatingly painful and horrible for others to watch.

What makes this bucolic, mountainous Derbyshire village (known as the Plague Town) so unique is not only that the plague wiped out such a high number of residents in such a short time, but also the way that its devastated townsfolk reacted to the deadly, infectious disease. They sacrificed themselves so others could live: Courageously cordoning themselves off from

the outside world, the Eyam villagers kept the evil event from spreading further, and this was the last place it hit in England.

The bubonic plague first surfaced around the late 1320s in China's Gobi Desert. It was spread rapidly by fleas and rats via trading ships. Eventually it hit Europe and, during the mid-1300s, killed some 25 million, one-third of the population. Later, between December 1664 and the beginning of 1666, some 100,000 died in London, about one-sixth the population.

It was during the summer of 1665 that a resident of London -- 150 miles away -- shipped an Eyam tailor some cloth. The package of old clothes and cloth patterns arrived wet and the tailor's assistant, George Viccars, who lived with the family, was told to take the cloth outside and spread it out to dry.

Obviously, no one realized that the damp cloth was already infected by fleas carrying the curse of the plague. In just four days Viccars was dead, the first victim in Eyam to die of the plague, buried on Sept. 7, 1665. A plaque in front of the home, Plague Cottage, lists some of the household members who died within days of each other. Only one, the tailor's wife, Mary, survived. She lost 13 relatives.

Another plaque summarizes the horror of the Hawksworth Family, who lived nearby. The husband, Peter, was the third victim of the plague in the village; his son Humphrey, 15 months, died just weeks later. And Peter's wife, Jane, was the sole survivor of the household, eventually losing 25 relatives, including her in-laws.

During the next horrifying 13 months, the stunned Eyam townsfolk quickly buried their dead, trying in vain to keep the devastating disease from spreading. In fact, during these mournful months of the plague, funerals were not held; families buried their own in the front or back yards, sometimes using old doors or chairs as biers.

Howe, a courageous villager, to do the burial. He would tie a cord around the neck or foot of the corpse -- so not to touch it -- and drag it to a nearby garden or field where he had dug a grave. For nearly three months he performed this awful task, never dreaming that he would end up burying both his wife Joan and only son William within days of each other in August 1666. Deeply grieving, he blamed himself for bringing the disease home to them. Miraculously, he survived the epidemic and lived another 32 years.

(For a couple of generations, Eyam parents would admonish their children to obey -- or else they would send for Marshall Howe! And some today believe that the popular nursery rhyme that goes, "Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posy. Ashes, ashes! We all fall down!" symbolizes the plague.)

Once summer arrived, the church's wise rector, the Rev. William Mompesson, closed the Eyam Parish Church to worshippers, fearing that the hot weather would make things worse. Instead they met in an outdoor enclave where they prayed twice weekly and held a Sunday service. Today it's the site of the annual Plague Commemoration Service, held the last Sunday in August. And the Eyam Museum pays tribute to the plague victims with displayed items.

The pastor and his assistant, the Rev. Thomas Stanley, had earlier admonished the townsfolk not to cross a certain boundary surrounding the village, designated by large stone and mound landmarks. It was at the Boundary Stone and Mompesson's Well where outsiders (earlier notified by the pastor) would quickly leave food and medical supplies, many donated by the Earl of Devonshire from his nearby Chatsworth House. Then they would flee, lest they themselves

fall ill. Village volunteers would retrieve the valuable items, leaving coins for payment that were then washed and disinfected with vinegar.

And it was because of this self-enforced isolation that the plague did not spread to surrounding areas. The Rev. Mompesson visited 76 parish families during the ordeal, comforting and praying with them. He and his beautiful wife Catherine had sadly and reluctantly sent their two young children, George and Elizabeth, ages 3 and 4, to live with relatives in Yorkshire, and they survived. However, Catherine, who had stayed behind to be at her husband's side, died of the plague at age 27 on Aug. 25, 1666, further devastating the townsfolk. She is buried in the churchyard.

Just outside town are the Riley Stones, a small graveyard where the farming Hancock Family is buried. Mrs. Hancock, who survived the plague, had the incomprehensible, tortuous task of burying her husband and six children in eight days. She had one surviving son, who had left the area prior to the plague breakout.

After mid-October that year, the deaths ceased. As a precaution, clothing and furniture were burned, and the bare necessities that remained were fumigated.

As the Rev. Mompesson (who moved from the village three years later) wrote a friend on Nov. 20, 1666: "Our town has become a Golgotha, the place of a skull; and had there not been a small remnant left, we had been as Sodom, and like to Gomorrah. My ears never heard such doleful lamentations -- my nose never smelled such horrid smells, and my eyes never beheld such ghastly spectacles." For sure, this charming, peaceful village -- then regarded as the valley of death -- was hell on earth.

INTRODUCTION (to Year of Wonders by Geraldine Brooks)

The 1600s marked both the dawn of modern medicine and the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment all over Europe. In England, these years also brought the Restoration?revolution in every aspect of life against Oliver Cromwell's Puritanism. English physicians charted the circulatory system, and the invention of the compound microscope and identification of bacteria were together about to begin unravelling the mystery of infectious disease. In 1662, King Charles established the Royal Society in order to promote the study of natural science. The world was changing rapidly, and its central focus shifted from God to man.

In 1665, in the remote English village of Eyam's small and closely knit community of lead miners and shepherds, cobblers and weavers' bubonic plague ("The Black Death") has taken the town hostage both literally and figuratively. In a decision brought about by Michael Mompellion, the radical but much-admired town minister, the villagers of Eyam quarantine themselves in their "wide green prison" and vow to suffer the scourge alone. Believing that the plague is God's judgment on their sinful world, most of the devoutly Christian villagers beg forgiveness and look for ways to assuage God's ire?e most puritanical take up self-flagellation in an attempt to cleanse themselves. Almost completely cut off from the outside world (save for the ingenious "boundary stone"), and after panic has well and truly set in, the villagers turn on one another. In

episodes that illustrate both the best of human nature (ministering to the sick) and the worst (a gravedigger profiteering from the dead), the townspeople grapple with their grief and fear. It is up to the story's heroine?young, widowed housemaid named Anna Frith? raise the existential questions about the origins of the plague, and she therefore becomes the embodiment of the conflict at the centre of the novel: God versus Nature.

It came to me then that we, all of us, spent a very great deal of time pondering these questions that, in the end, we could not answer. If we balanced the time we spent contemplating God, and why He afflicted us, with more thought as to how the Plague spread and poisoned our blood, then we might come nearer to saving our lives. While these thoughts were vexing, they brought with them also a chink of light. For if we could be allowed to see the Plague as a thing in Nature merely, we did not have to trouble about some grand celestial design that had to be completed before the disease would abate. We could simply work upon it as a farmer might toil to rid his field of unwanted tare, knowing that when we found the tools and the method and the resolve, we would free ourselves, no matter if we were a village of sinners or a host of saints.

After suffering the death of her suitor and her two children, and despite her own spiritual beliefs and adoration for the rector and his wife, Anna boldly rejects the idea that the pestilence is a call for repentance. And in a time of such turmoil, she shrugs off the social and religious mores that would keep a weaker woman in her place. With the knowledge about herbal remedies that she has gleaned from the village herbalists Mem and Anys Gowdie, and the support and tutelage of her patroness, Elinor Mompellion, Anna emerges more powerful and self-confident than before. At the end of the novel, it is clear she has become stronger than even Michael Mompellion, the town's figurehead and religious rock. Anna's questions her role as a village healer eventually lead her to her true calling. Caught up in the struggle between science and religion, Anna's dilemma mirrors that of the world in her time. Ultimately she confesses: "I cannot say that I have faith anymore. Hope, perhaps. We have agreed that it will do for now."

Book Club Discussion Questions *(from Viking, the publisher)*

1. All of the characters in this novel have their failings and as a result they are all fully human. Are you surprised by the secrets Elinor and Michael Mompellion each reveal to Anna about their marriage? How do they change your feelings about each character? Do they make either seem weaker in a way?
2. The Bradford family bears the brunt of Mompellion's rage when they leave town to save

themselves. However, weren't they only doing what every other noble family did in those days: run because they had the means to run? Setting aside the events near the end of the novel (which make it clear that one would be hard-pressed to find a redeeming quality in any of them), can you really blame the Bradfords for running?

3. How much of Mompellion's push for the quarantine had to do with the secrets he shared with Elinor? Did his own dark side and self-loathing push him to sacrifice the town or was he really acting out of everyone's best interests?

4. Keeping in mind that this story takes place a good twenty-five years before the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts, what is the role of the Gowdie women in the novel? What is it about these women that drives their neighbors to murderous rage? How does their nonconformity lead to their becoming scapegoats?

5. How would you explain Anna's mental and spiritual unraveling? What are the pivotal experiences leading up to her breakdown and her eventual rebirth?

6. Discuss the feminist undertones of the story. How does each female character—Anna, Elinor, the Gowdies, and even Anna's stepmother—exhibit strengths that the male characters do not?

7. In a story where the outcome is already known from the very beginning—most of the villagers will die—discuss the ways in which the author manages to create suspense.

8. The author creates an incredible sense of time and place with richly textured language and thoughtful details—of both the ordinary (everyday life in Eyam) and the extraordinary (the gruesome deaths of the villagers). Discuss some of the most vivid images and their importance to the story and to your own experience reading it.

9. Can we relate the story of this town's extraordinary sacrifice to our own time? Is it unrealistic to expect a village facing a similar threat to make the same decision nowadays? What lessons might we learn from the villagers of Eyam?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year
by Lloyd Moote and Dorothy C. Moote

In the Wake of the Plague by Norman F. Cantor

The Plague by Albert Camus

Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier

Journal of the Plague Year by Daniel Defoe

Mask of Night by Phillip Goden

The White by Deborah Larsen

The Crimson Petal and the White by Michel Faber